

Happier consumers can lead to healthier environment, research reveals

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The pursuit of true happiness can lead people to lifestyles that will not only be satisfying but will be better for the environment, according to an overview of psychological research presented at the American Psychological Association's 122nd Annual Convention.

"For decades, consumerism has been on a [collision course](#) with the environment, with consumer appetites draining the planet of natural resources and accelerating [global warming](#). One view is that we need to change consumption in order to save the planet," said Miriam Tatzel, PhD, of Empire State College. "But what if we approached it from the other way around? What if what's good for the consumer meets what's good for the environment?"

Positive psychology, or the study of happiness, well-being and quality of life, provides the answers to what really brings happiness to consumers, Tatzel said. Several studies have determined that people's basic psychological needs include competence, autonomy, positive relationships, self-acceptance and personal growth. And research has shown that rather than fulfilling these needs, the pursuit of money and possessions takes time away from more personally fulfilling activities and social relationships.

Tatzel's presentation illustrated how many consumer traits have direct links to the environment for both good and bad. Materialism is not only bad for the environment, it's bad for consumers' well-being. "People's wants escalate as they tire of what they have and they want something

else, which in turn leads to more consumption and more waste in landfills, more energy consumed and more carbon emitted into the atmosphere," she said. "The larger the gap between what one wants and what one has, the greater the dissatisfaction. Less materialism equals more happiness."

Another path to well-being is thrift, which means conserving resources as well as money, Tatzel noted. Frugal people are happier with life in general, according to a 2014 study. That may be because avoiding the negative consequences of spending too much and going into debt is one way to avoid unhappiness, she said.

People enjoy doing things more than having things, with other studies finding that people realize more lasting happiness by changing their activities than by changing their material circumstances. "Experiences live on in memory, are incomparable, often shared with others and don't have to be resource intensive," said Tatzel.

She described other research that has found that people are more likely to be happy by cultivating personal talents and relationships more than money and fame, and by having an independent sense of self that results in not caring much what others think of their possessions.

When it comes to having money, studies have shown a high income may buy life satisfaction, but not [happiness](#), Tatzel said. People's emotional well-being, which reflects daily experiences of joy, stress, sadness, anger and affection that make life pleasant or unpleasant is affected differently by having money than people's [life evaluation](#), which refers to thoughts about their life, research has found. Life evaluation steadily rises with income. Emotional well-being also rises with income, but there is no further progress beyond an annual income of about \$75,000, research has found.

"A society in which some people are idolized for being fabulously rich sets a standard of success that is unattainable and leads us to try to approach it by working more and spending more," Tatzel said. "Cooling the consumption-driven economy, working less and consuming less are better for the [environment](#) and better for humans, too."

More information: Session 3182: A Blessing and a Curse – Consumer Well-Being, presentation: "[Consumer Well-Being & Environmental Well-Being: A Surprising Compatibility.](#)" Miriam Tatzel, PhD, Empire State College, State University of New York, Saturday, 11 a.m. to 11:50 a.m., East Salon D, Walter E. Washington Convention Center, 801 Mount Vernon Pl., NW, Washington, D.C.

Provided by American Psychological Association

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